



News Release

WISCONSIN ARMY AND AIR NATIONAL GUARD

Public Affairs Office
2400 Wright Street
Madison, WI 53704

Contact: Lt. Col. Tim Donovan
608-242-3050
Cell: 608-516-1777

September 19, 2005

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

News Feature

National Guard's West Bend helicopter crews ride to the rescue in New Orleans

*By Capt. Jon Powers
New Jersey National Guard*

(Naval Air Station Belle Chasse, La.) — Only one aircraft in the Army inventory can pluck a stranded person off a rooftop, and that's a helicopter.

Within two days of Hurricane Katrina's landfall in southern Louisiana, the Wisconsin Army National Guard's 832nd Medical Company and three West Bend-based UH-1 Huey helicopters responded to an urgent call for help.

Maj. Matthew Strub, the 832nd's commander, received an initial "warning order" to fly south on Aug. 31, then a final order to depart two days later. By the evening of Sept. 3, about 20 air crewmen had arrived at Naval Air Station Belle Chasse just south of New Orleans and were ready for missions with their hoist-capable helicopters the next morning.

"The first few days it looked like there were hundreds of helicopters in the air and we flew nonstop from dawn to dusk for three or four days," Strub said.

"When we saw the hurricane hit there was a lot of adrenaline," said Capt. Timothy Eaton, a helicopter pilot who deployed with the 832nd. "We have trained for this mission for years and we knew we were needed."

"Once we arrived, the devastation brought tears to our eyes, it was of Biblical proportions," Eaton added. Initially, the rescue effort centered on the search and rescue of stranded residents, but there was not much searching needed. Victims were everywhere, signaling for help from their rooftops or the elevated highways. "We trained our eyes to look for movement, white flags waving or people signaling," Eaton said.

— more —

Helicopters to the rescue

Page 2

“I was surprised at the number of people who didn’t want to leave, they were waving us off,” said Staff Sgt. Eric Leukert, a helicopter crew chief. “They would be on their roofs and we’d lower a medic down to them with some food and water then move the helicopter off so the medic to talk to them,” Leukert said.

The helicopters of the 832nd have been used in live hoist rescues year-round in all weather conditions. For more than two years, the unit provided medevac support to Fort Lewis, Wash., where the 832nd’s Hueys flew rescue missions over the wilderness terrain of the Pacific Northwest. “We picked skiers and hikers off the mountains and gained a lot of experience in rescues,” Strub said.

That experience proved to be a lifesaver for more than 130 New Orleans residents.

Among the many heartbreaking stories throughout the devastated city, Leukert will always remember one rescue in particular. “We hoisted up a woman in her bathrobe, she was crying, and that was all she had left at that time was that bathrobe,” Leukert said. “Her house was almost totally under water.”

Thanks to the efforts of the 832nd, that woman and more than 100 others like her have more than bathrobes: they have their lives, too.

Although most of the Wisconsin Guard’s hurricane relief task force returned to Wisconsin late last week, the Guard’s aviation mission continues with two UH-60 Black Hawks from Madison and West Bend’s three UH-1 Huey helicopters and their crews who will remain in the region through the end of September.

#

Note: Capt. Jon Powell is a New Jersey National Guard public affairs officer.

Current News Releases available at: <http://dma.wi.gov/news.asp>